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Soviet Leadership Shifts

Is Gromyko's elevation to the Chairmanship of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet (head of State) a loss or a gain for Gorbachev?

The previous three General Secretaries have held the post. It gave them a platform to be the chief formal spokesman on foreign policy to the outside world, especially at summits. For this reason it was a real gain in political power for the incumbent. And this would suggest that Gorbachev's failure to get it signifies continued effective opposition to his political ambitions among the remaining old guard and perhaps among younger Politburo members seemingly beholden to him.

The stronger case can be made, however, that this is another gain for Gorbachev, although perhaps not in the straight forward line of movement seen in the past three CC Plenums -- the last of which, yesterday, clearly showed Gorbachev's power by advancing his clients and removing Romanov:

- The head of state post has, historically, been largely ceremonial. Neither Stalin nor Khrushchev needed it to be the acknowledged leaders in both foreign and domestic affairs. This post acquired its prominence under Brezhnev who always was a chairman of the board, consensus-building type in his leadership style, rather than the one-man-commander Gorbachev probably hopes to become.
- Gromyko has been replaced as Minister of Foreign Affairs by Shevardnadze, who is a party man, beholden to Gorbachev, and inexperienced in the field, thus strengthening Gorbachev's role in the actual making of foreign policy.
- Gorbachev's speech nominating Gromyko stressed the domestic role of the Supreme Soviet, thus implying Gromyko's removal from any real foreign policy role, while Gromyko's acceptance speech noted the Supreme Soviet's international role. In short, there may still be a bit of a struggle about Gromyko's influence over foreign policy.
- In addition, Gorbachev said that keeping the General Secretary and Supreme Soviet roles separate is a requirement of the current "specific conditions" when basic party-policy lines are being remolded. He thus implied that things could change later, say, after the next Party Congress.

This interpretation should not be read to say that Gorbachev faces no opposition and that everything is now going his way. There continue to be struggle and uncertainty about personnel moves up to the last minute, as conflicting rumors about the Soviet presidency testify. Gorbachev has quite

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openly alluded to conflict in the Politburo over domestic economic policy. It is possible that Gorbachev had to give Gromyko a prominent position in which to serve out his last years because the Foreign Minister could challenge Gorbachev's will on foreign policy and could not simply be dumped.

As Embassy Moscow notes, it is likely that we shall now see some important changes in the Foreign Ministry and the Central Committees international staffs. These will probably strengthen the role of the Central Committee and Gorbachev's policy control. Furthermore, to the extent Sheverdnadze has had a foreign policy record, it has been canted toward emphasis on the Third World. His new job may be in line with Gorbachev's stress on a pushy, orthodox, anti-American policy toward the Third World.

Gromyko's "elevation" leaves open the possibility that Gorbachev will seek to take Tikhonov's job as Prime Minister at some point, which would make Gorbachev a stronger individual leader than any since Khrushchev.

There is no practical reason why Gromyko's getting the presidency should stand in the way of a Reagan-Gorbachev summit should Gorbachev really want one. And he probably does, on his own terms, to make him into a world-class statesman. The Soviets will see tactical value in new US fears that Gromyko in the presidency could make a summit less probable; it will tend to keep the US in the demandeur role, publicly at least.

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